

Conservatives' rise in popularity has been driven by Canada's elite, not majority, says Linda McQuaig

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If Stephen Harper's Conservatives win tomorrow, their victory will no doubt be heralded as a seismic shift in Canadian politics „ as the dawn of a new conservative era.

Actually, it will probably have more to do with the shifting loyalties of Canada's elite.

In other words, a Harper victory will not be a sign that Canadian attitudes are moving rightward, despite the best efforts of the *National Post* to cast it this way.

If anything, the Canadian electorate has been getting more socially progressive in recent years, according to pollster Frank Graves, president of Ottawa-based EKOS Research Associates.

Graves says Harper's sudden rise in the polls reflects his increased support among only a few groups „ primarily among affluent, older, predominantly male Canadians. (By contrast, support for Harper among Canadians under 25 is only about one in four, says Graves.)

This older, affluent crowd packs a punch. It is politically active, well-connected and dominant in public debate. It's the same group that helped Paul Martin in his long quest for power. With its support, Martin was able to push aside a sitting prime minister who, at the time at least, enjoyed considerable popularity with Canadians.

This group now apparently sees its interests best served by Harper „ in part, Graves says, because of financial issues that have attracted little attention in the campaign, such as Harper's strong support for income trusts and his pledge to effectively eliminate the taxation of capital gains. (The capital gains move particularly would deliver a huge windfall to the richest Canadians.)

This shifting preference of the Canadian elite doesn't mean there's been an overall shift in Canadian attitudes.

For years, most Canadians have resisted the extreme strain of conservatism that Harper has represented, considering it at odds with goals like tolerance and diversity, social inclusion and equality, as well as internationalism, the United Nations and the rule of law.

You could call this basic set of attitudes the "Canadian consensus" „ a consensus that, in the past, often cut across party lines. Old-style Conservatives like Joe Clark and David Crombie largely embraced it, as did most Liberals and New Democrats.

Stephen Harper's Conservatives are a different breed than Joe Clark's Conservatives, which is why there was much acrimony and many defections when Harper's Canadian Alliance effectively took over the old Conservative party, creating a new entity more in line with American-style neoconservatism.

Whatever political party wins the election tomorrow, it will almost certainly do so with the support of considerably less than half of Canadian voters.

So it makes sense that that party „ whichever it is „ be held to minority status, where it has to heed other parties.

Such constraint on power is a good idea, particularly if the ruling party is out of sync with the Canadian consensus „ and has triumphed largely because older, affluent Canadian males have found a new guy to champion their cause.

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